



Syria
Archéologie, art et histoire

83 | 2006
Hommage à Henri de Contenson

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/syria/159>

DOI: 10.4000/syria.159

ISSN: 2076-8435

Publisher

IFPO - Institut français du Proche-Orient

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2006

Number of pages: 25-30

ISBN: 9782351590515

ISSN: 0039-7946

Electronic reference

Andrew M. T. Moore, « Henri de Contenson: a personal memoir », *Syria* [Online], 83 | 2006, Online since 01 July 2016, connection on 07 November 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/syria/159> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/syria.159>

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HENRI DE CONTENSON : A PERSONAL MEMOIR

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It was May 1970 and Lebanon was warm and green from the plentiful spring rains; high summer with the onset of hot, humid days was still a month away. I was in Beirut for a couple of weeks, enjoying the hospitality of the Institut français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth as a visiting *pensionnaire*. My object was to examine collections of Neolithic material in the museums, to get to know members of the archaeological community in Lebanon, and to visit ancient sites. The stay at the Institut was tranquil and rewarding, as my research yielded much valuable information that would later be incorporated in a doctoral thesis. Yet a more important opportunity lay ahead. I wanted to visit Syria, guessing that the answer to many of the problems then of significance in research on the Neolithic could only be resolved through first-hand understanding of the material available there. But few British archaeologists had travelled through Syria in the previous decade and the country was largely an unknown land to them, so little information about research possibilities was available. My letters to the authorities in Damascus sent months before had gone unanswered. Would it be possible to see anything at all once I got there?

The quiet of the Institut was suddenly disturbed by the arrival of a group of French archaeologists on their way to Damascus, Henri de Contenson in the lead, with Olivier Aurenche and Francis Hours also in the party. They heard my story and immediately invited me to join them, an extraordinarily generous invitation to extend to an unknown British student of archaeology. On arrival in Damascus they drove straight to the National Museum and swept into the offices of the Director General of Antiquities and of Dr. Adnan Bounni, Director of Excavations, with me in train. There, after the usual pleasantries were exchanged, I was introduced and vouched for. On the strength of that introduction and recommendation, within a few hours I had been given letters of permission to study material in the Damascus and Aleppo museums, as well as to visit sites. In all this Henri was the chief advocate, and I owe my start in Syrian archaeology to his warm support and encouragement.

Henri had further plans in mind. He knew that I already had had extensive excavation experience and invited me to join his team for the first season of excavation at Tell Aswad, planned for the following spring (**fig. 1**). I was eager to accept, but pointed out that my wedding was to take place in September 1970 and so the consent of my bride to be, Barbara Pough, would be essential. Indeed, an invitation to me would have to include her. Barbara and I had already planned to leave for Western Asia a few months after our wedding in Oxford, and Henri was pleased to welcome us both to his project. So it came about that we found ourselves back in Damascus in March 1971, awaiting the arrival of Henri and Marie-Jeanne de Contenson and the rest of their team. While there we learned from Dr. Bounni of the large-scale campaign of excavations already under way in the Euphrates Valley in the area to be flooded by the completion of the Tabqa Dam. In the next few days we drove north to Aleppo, travelled through the threatened sector of the Euphrates Valley, visited several Neolithic sites of potential interest, and also saw the construction site of the dam itself. We understood at once that here were sites that could contribute significantly to furthering our understanding of the Neolithic and the development of farming.



Figure 1 : The Tell Aswad excavation team in 1971. Henri de Contenson is on the far left, Barbara and Andrew Moore third and fourth from the left.

After Henri and his party arrived in Damascus in early April, the members of the team were invited to lodge with him and Marie-Jeanne in the apartment they had rented in the Abu Rumaneh quarter. Those days were very happy ones. Henri and Marie-Jeanne were most gracious hosts, and Marie-Jeanne made sure we were amply fed (**fig. 2**); we fondly recall her enthusiasm for adding ample quantities of Dijon mustard to all her dishes. Early in the morning we would be driven out to Tell Aswad, motoring through the Ghuta and out into the open country beyond. The apricot and almond trees were in blossom and there was often mist along the course of the Barada River. The place seemed indeed to be an oasis. On the site the work went well as we dug back into levels of the earliest known Neolithic settlement in Syria (**fig. 3**)¹. In the afternoons after the day's fieldwork we would sort the finds in a room at the Azem Palace. Henri would often excuse Barbara and myself, leaving the newly-weds to roam through the souk and to make new friends among the vendors.

One morning towards the end of the season, Dr. Bounni summoned me to his office. It was clear that he had consulted Henri beforehand, who had anticipated the nature of the conversation. Bounni invited me to go to the Euphrates and choose a site to excavate. Such an invitation was unprecedented : after all, I was a graduate student then just 26 years old. So it was that a few weeks later we returned to the Euphrates Valley, this time to conduct a formal reconnaissance. After comparing the few Neolithic sites available for investigation, we selected Abu Hureyra. It is thus to Henri de Contenson and his recommendation that I owe the extraordinary opportunity of excavating that site². I am delighted to have this opportunity of thanking him for that support.

There were other pleasant encounters in Syria and, in time, also in France. Later in the summer of 1971 Henri was excavating at Ras Shamra, and we visited him and Marie-Jeanne there for a few days. The dig house on the shores of the Mediterranean was filled by members of the excavation team

1. CONTENSON 1972.

2. MOORE, HILLMAN & LEGGE 2000.

so Marie-Jeanne lodged us in the private rooms reserved for Professor Claude and Mme Schaeffer. We were sworn never to tell anyone of this mild transgression of the Schaeffers' privacy, but I happily recall it now as another example of the Contenson's generosity. Then, again, a few years later during a holiday there was a visit to Marie-Jeanne's family summer home in Quiberon.

What, then, of Henri's accomplishments in archaeology? It would perhaps be most apropos if I outlined the impact of his research in the wider, especially English speaking, world. Here his contributions have been highly influential over many years, above all among those of us who investigate the Neolithic of Western Asia and the emergence of farming societies there. For it is to Henri we owe the discovery that Syria had been a major centre of Neolithic development, an unexpected revelation that rebalanced our entire understanding of the emergence of early agricultural settlements around the Fertile Crescent.

Henri's first contributions to the prehistory of Western Asia were made in Palestine. Much of his research there was concerned with classifying the artifacts of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, especially the pottery. In a series of articles published in the 1950s and 1960s he reviewed the material excavated from all the major sites and many of the minor ones before and after the Second World War. Many of these articles have recently been conveniently gathered together and republished in a single monograph³. These pioneer works of primary publication and synthesis brought order to what had previously been only vaguely understood and helped establish a more systematic approach to the later prehistory of Palestine. Henri also collated the Palestinian sequence with material from sites across Western Asia⁴. I found his insights of great value as I began my own study of some of this material in the early 1970s⁵. Henri has maintained his interest in this field, bringing his own early observations up to date in supplementary notes published in his 2004 volume.

These studies, valuable though they were, reached an audience composed mainly of specialists. But Henri's discoveries in Syria in the 1960s and later were to have a much broader impact. He decided to embark on a series of excavations of substantial Neolithic village sites in the Damascus Basin and Euphrates Valley. Several of the sites that Henri chose to investigate, most notably Tell Ramad, had been discovered long before but their significance had not been realised. Henri, however, through his earlier experiences in Palestine, grasped their potential. In so doing, he established that Syria was every bit as important as Palestine, the Jordan Valley, and the Zagros foothills as a centre of early Neolithic cultural development. At approximately the same time a colleague of Henri's, James Mellaart, and others were investigating Hacilar, Çatal Höyük and related Neolithic sites in Anatolia. Henri's research helped to bridge the geographical gap in the distribution of Neolithic sites between the two ends of the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia.



Figure 2 : Breakfast at Tell Aswad, 1971. From left to right: Henri de Contenson, Jean-Claude Picard, François Valla and Barbara Moore.

3. CONTENSON 2004.

4. CONTENSON 1966.

5. MOORE 1973.

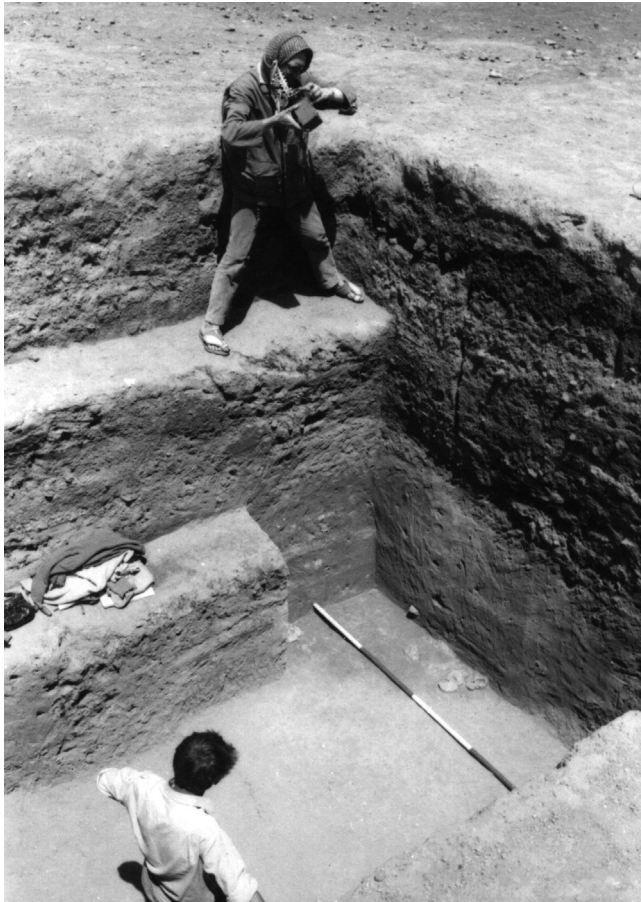


Figure 3 : Henri de Contenson photographing the west trench at Tell Aswad, 1971. Andrew Moore is in the foreground (photo: Georges Obeid).

Henri's best known excavation was of the major Neolithic site of Tell Ramad just south-west of Damascus. This long-lived site was inhabited for perhaps a millennium and a half, beginning around 8,000 BP (calibrated). Occupation there began during the pre-pottery Neolithic and continued until after the craft of potting was well established. Henri excavated there for a decade, beginning in 1963, at first with Willem van Liere, a geomorphologist working with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and later on his own. The results of each season of excavation were promptly published in the *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes*⁶ and elsewhere. Indeed, rapid and comprehensive publication of research has been one of the distinguishing features of Henri's career. Towards the end of the excavations Henri published a summary report in the popular journal *Archaeology*⁷. Henri's English is excellent, a result of his early international education, and this publication brought his research to the attention of a broad English-speaking audience, thus giving it wide influence.

The excavations at Ramad demonstrated that there were important Neolithic sites in the central Levant north of Palestine. Many of the artifacts from the site resembled those already known from Palestinian Neolithic

sites, but others were distinctively Syrian. Among these were pieces of "*vaisselles blanches*" or white plaster ware that would later be found on several other sites in western and central Syria. The human plaster figures from the site were unique, and testified to a rich ideology on the part of the inhabitants. The plant remains and animal bones published by other scientists indicated quite clearly that agriculture and herding were both well established at Ramad far back in the Neolithic.

Ramad was the first Neolithic site in Syria to be excavated to modern standards, with regular use of sieves. Accordingly, the samples of artifacts and other materials recovered were unusually comprehensive. The radiocarbon dates for the site established a partial chronology for the Neolithic in Syria for the first time. These were all important contributions to method and to knowledge. The full results of the excavation have recently been presented in a final volume⁸.

During the decade-long campaign of excavations at Ramad, Henri found time to explore one other site far to the north-east, Buqras in the Euphrates Valley. This was a substantial mound that had been discovered by van Liere: it dated from the earlier phases of the Neolithic and so was approximately contemporary with Ramad. Time permitted no more than the excavation of two small soundings in the site during the spring of 1965, but these demonstrated quite clearly that the site spanned the transition

6. For example CONTENSON & VAN LIERE 1964.

7. CONTENSON 1971.

8. CONTENSON 2000.

from the pre-pottery to the pottery Neolithic⁹. Buqras was located in a region hitherto regarded as far beyond the limits of settlement in the Neolithic. The principal importance of the excavation, therefore, was that it opened up the possibility that much of central Syria had been occupied during the earlier Neolithic, and thus that this region might contribute fresh insights on the establishment of a farming way of life.

Henri's research at Buqras proved to be prophetic. A few years later other archaeologists began to investigate the valley higher up the Euphrates as the salvage project associated with the construction of the Tabqa Dam got under way. They took note of the discoveries at Buqras, inferring quite correctly that other sites of similar antiquity might await discovery there. That proved to be the case, as we now know from the identification of the Neolithic sites of Halula, Jerf el-Ahmar, Mureybat, Sheikh Hassan, and Tell 'Abr 3, among others. Certainly, it provided an impetus for our work at Abu Hureyra and also offered an important reference for our discoveries there.

Henri's later research in the Damascus Basin, at Tell Aswad above all but also at Ghoraife¹⁰, completed the Neolithic sequence in that region, another first in Syrian archaeology. Furthermore, it enabled him and his colleagues to sketch out the development of farming in this crucial area over the whole span of the Neolithic. Among the most important of his discoveries was the identification of the remains of domestic plants from Tell Aswad, including emmer and einkorn wheat, bread wheat, barley, peas, lentils, and linseed¹¹. Several of these plants were cultivated from the initial settlement of the site around 11,000 BP (calibrated). This means that agriculture was practiced throughout the Neolithic in the Damascus Basin, as on the Euphrates and in the Jordan Valley. The analysis of the fauna from Tell Aswad is as yet less definitive but here, too, there is reason to believe that goats were being deliberately exploited from an early date. Somewhat later, at Ramad, the economy was based almost exclusively on agriculture and herding of domestic animals.

It remains to comment briefly on Henri's other major excavation, that of Ras Shamra. Here his main challenge was to excavate through the massive deposits on the site to reveal the Chalcolithic (Ubaid, Halaf) and Neolithic levels¹². His excavations there were certainly illuminating, confirming the extraordinary extent of the prehistoric settlements and the long sequence of apparently continuous occupation, but essentially added more details to what was already known from the work of Schaeffer and others.

Henri's most significant contribution to archaeology has been to demonstrate that there were Neolithic sites of major importance in Syria, a region that had previously been discounted in research, and that these needed to be investigated if we were to arrive at a balanced, comprehensive understanding of the development of this crucial phase in world prehistory. His own excavations have illuminated the Neolithic sequence of occupation in the Damascus Basin, on the Syrian coast, and on the Euphrates. His research has made a fundamental contribution to the development of the Lyon cultural sequence¹³, certainly the best scheme of cultural development currently available for Western Asia. In addition, with the help of colleagues, Henri has been able to confirm the great antiquity of the development of farming in Syria.

Henri introduced modern methods of recovery to the excavation of prehistoric sites in Syria. This ensured that most of the artifacts on his excavations would be collected and analyzed. It also set an example for other archaeologists to follow, among them archaeologists of other nationalities and Syrian colleagues. But there is one aspect of his work that deserves special recognition: Henri has published all his research of consequence, including field surveys, pottery analyses and, above all, his excavations.

9. CONTENSON & VAN LIERE 1966.

10. CONTENSON 1995.

11. VAN ZEIST & BAKKER-HEERES 1982.

12. CONTENSON 1992.

13. HOURS *et alii* 1994.

This is an extraordinary record, one that is perhaps unique among the present generation of archaeologists working in Western Asia.

I count it an honour to have been invited to contribute an essay of homage to Henri de Contenson, mentor, colleague and friend. May he long continue to add to our knowledge of those human societies that established the first settlements which depended upon the cultivation of crops and the keeping of domestic animals for their subsistence.

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